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CONTENTS

Tertiary Education and Gender Disparities in a Dollarised Economy: A Case Study of the Faculty of Social Studies at the University of Zimbabwe. Tichaona Zivengwa, Fanuel Hazvina and Nobuhle Maphosa	204
Evaluation of Barriers to the Integration of ICT in Teaching and Learning of Science and Mathematics in Zimbabwe's Secondary Schools. Fred Zindi and Fenton Ruparuganda	222
Student Teacher Perceptions of the Role of Classroom Mentors on Attachment Teaching Practice: The Case at Morgan ZINTEC College. Manuel Rwodzi, Francis Muchenje, and Beatrice Bondai	236
The Impact of Water Shortages on Educational Delivery in Selected Schools in Harare East District Mavis Rufaro Chikooore and John Bowora	259
Organisation, Quality and Challenges in the B. Ed Technical Education Degree Industrial Attachment Course, University of Zimbabwe. Misozi Chiweshe, Emily Motsi and Xavier Edziwa	276
An Evaluation of the "New History" Phenomenon Toreraayi Moyo and Stanzia Moyo	302
Teaching Science through the Science Technology and Society (STS) lens in Zimbabwean High Schools: Opportunities and Constrains. Raviro Kasembe	314

An Evaluation of the "New History" Phenomenon

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article was to evaluate the "New History" approach. This paper explores the argument that the new "New History" phenomenon was an attempt to rejuvenate an interest in History. The "New History" phenomenon was launched because of the fear that History was in danger as it faced possible extinction from the curriculum. Basically, the proponents of the phenomenon believed that History was in the intensive care unit and had lost popularity among stakeholders. Some of the comments given by scholars like Haydn, Arthur and Hunt (1997:25) were that History was, "... a desiccated and stultifying subject of dubious relevance and little clear purpose". The study was purely qualitative. Curriculum document analysis, classroom observations, and in-depth interviews were used as data collection methods. The study revealed that the possibility of negative attitudes towards History by pupils is primarily due to the teacher centred methods used. It is recommended that the progressive teaching methods such as document study, research projects, role playing, field work, debates, interviews and discussions, which are pupil centred, should be used to stimulate pupils' interest in the subject.

INTRODUCTION

The 'New History' phenomenon was a culmination of intense criticism to history teaching which was basically teacher centred. The British School Council Enquiry 1 (1968:4) and Hollowell (2010) observed that the attitude of school-leavers towards a range of topics

pupils are not given chances to explore on their own, either in groups, or as individuals. Fines (1969) and Hollowell (2010) complained that children had been bored to the tears by syllabuses geared to the memorization of facts. In fact, Hollowell (2010:16) stipulated that:

Above all, the same nonsensical methods decried years ago continue in the schools: notes are dictated; passages learned off by heart, vast periods are scampered over so quickly that no real understanding can possibly be achieved.

By relying on the same teaching methods, it became monotonous and boring.

Jones (1970:45) took note of the typical comments on the way in which the subject was taught when pupils remarked: *"They went on and on, the same thing over and over again ... no discussions, just questions. We have to look up the answers"*. The pupils in most schools as noted by Blishen (1996), Jones (1970), Stockley (2008) and Eurica (2010) are not accorded opportunities to learn through discovery. They were frustrated by the rote learning method and hence disliked the subject. Similarly, Eurica (2010:65) quoted a fourteen year old pupil who said, *"I awake to a sickening thud, each Monday morning – double History, eighty minutes of the toneless drone of the master's voice ..."* Faced with evidence such as this, it can be argued that although History was and is potentially of unlimited interest, it was and is regarded as one of the less popular subjects at secondary school level. As a result, it became a necessity to rejuvenate an interest in History through the "New History" phenomenon.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To identify the methods used in history teaching;
- To assess the relevance of the methods of teaching history; and
- To make recommendations using the 'New History' approach.

Methodology

The study was purely qualitative. Curriculum document analysis, direct classroom observations, and in-depth interviews were used as data collection methods. Classroom observations (using an observational guide) and in-depth interviews (using an in-depth interview guide) were carried out to 10 Post Graduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) student teachers who were on teaching practice at Harare, Allan Wilson, Mount Pleasant, Girls High and Prince Edward High Schools. Classroom observations and in-depth interviews helped the researcher to get first-hand information of the methods used in teaching history. The relevance of the methods in teaching history to the entire process of learning was also assessed using direct classroom observations and in-depth interviews. On the other hand, Curriculum document analysis was used to assess the relevance of history as a subject and the various methods of history teaching. Qualitative data was analysed using the thematic approach

Findings of the Study: Traditional Approaches to Teaching History

A major cause of resentment of History was its apparent lack of utility at a time when utility value seemed the prime justification for a subject to be included in the curriculum. In-depth interviews with PGDE student teachers revealed that History did not appear to offer solutions to the fundamental problems currently bedeviling the Zimbabwean society. One student teacher in an in-depth interview echoed that:

The study of the Mutapa state, Hitler, Mussolini, Nguni incursions in Central Africa or even the Ndebele state, do not in any way offer solutions to the current economic and political problems in Zimbabwe.

Documentary review also highlighted that the era when History could be studied for the mere object of expanding the frontiers of knowledge had fast disappeared and the history teacher was being tasked to justify the time he or she spent with pupils in the classroom. Barnnet (2002) says that:

Two main tests seem from time to time to be applied in estimating the value of a subject in a curriculum. The first is whether or not a particular study tends to the good of existing social organizations. If a subject cannot be shown to do this, directly or indirectly, it has no proper claim to be admitted to the scheme of

The development of historical skills like critical reasoning, empathy, extrapolation, analysis and synthesis are invaluable contributions to human life and History, as a subject, should be commended for developing such skills. Nevertheless, the bulk of the population in Zimbabwe for example, had more pressing bread and butter issues. The economic woes facing society had spread to the classroom and the history teacher was in the 'dock' to defend and justify the existence of his subject. In-depth interviews with PGDE student teachers on teaching practice revealed that the subject of History faces competition with subjects like Agriculture, Technical Graphics, Home Economics, Commerce, Carpentry and others. These subjects were inclined towards the employment market and self-help projects. Thus, economic pressure forced the subject to lose value, generating disinterest among pupils, parents, employers and other stakeholders. Due to competition, History proved rather irrelevant and not in keeping with the demands of the times. It became old wine in new

wine skins. According to Jeffreys (2001) "*History is languishing in the schools because of lack of relevance*".

The critical shortage of resources was a major cause for the unpopularity of the subject. Classroom observations and in-depth interviews with PGDE teachers on teaching practice revealed that the history teacher in Zimbabwe, for example, is expected to source teaching and learning materials. When syllabus (2166) was introduced in Zimbabwe in the early 1990's, the government did very little to assist the teachers with materials needed to make the new syllabus a success. Curriculum planners apparently abdicated responsibility, leaving the entire burden to history teachers. Thus, the history teacher was and is still expected to do an impossible job. As a result, the history curriculum suffered tissue rejection from both practitioners and learners. Without sufficient teaching and learning material, history teaching could not be effectively done. At Harare High School in Mbare, the researcher observed that a class of forty students only had three text books. It was difficult for pupils to do research.

History became increasingly unpopular because the syllabus was too extensive. An in-depth interview with PGDE student teachers revealed that History syllabus in Zimbabwe is too extensive, making it difficult for the teachers to cover the entire course. Even documentary review by Burston (1976) and Hollowell (2010) supports the aforementioned assertion. In fact Hollowell (2010:78) argued that "*The course of historical teaching is too extensive, and its arrangement, is ill-adapted to the capacities and wants of children in public elementary schools*". It was difficult to cover the entire course.

Classroom observations revealed that pupils possibly disliked History because they had to memories lists of dates and strings of names. These were easily forgotten because memory is fallible. During classroom observations of PGDE students on teaching practice, the researcher noted that the child's memory was loaded without ever appealing to the imagination. The idea of loading

pupils' memories with data was also noted by Freeman (1879) and Kendall (2009). In fact Kendall (2009:10) observed that. *"The child is overwhelmed with words and names, without being taught to attach any ideas to the words and names"*.

Recommendations

Using the Tenets of the 'New History' Approach

It should be noted that significant changes are now being done to the study of History. The motives for change are many, and the starting-points of discussion are equally various. In light of the "New History" philosophy, the methodology should be crafted in a way that benefits the slow developer.

The "New History" phenomenon entails a shift from authoritarian methods of traditional teaching to the progressive methods. The teacher should choose various methods of provoking learning rather than depending upon the more passive response engendered by traditional methods. He will make much of the popular slogan, 'child centred teaching', and his classes will often be engaged on individual or group work. The teacher's role is to guide the learning process and pupils' interests will be stimulated through their exploration from the known to the unknown.

The psychology of the child is an equally important component of the "New History" approach. Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, has outlined the three basic stages in the development of the mind of a child. These stages are; pre-operational, concrete operational and the formal operational. According to Piaget, pupils between 11 and 16 years operate at concrete operational while those over the age of 16 operate in the formal stage. These stages are crucial in determining the appropriate teaching methods for each group. The acceptance that children pass through cognitive stages, pose a big question to the history teacher. In concurrence, Wardsworth (1975) and Kendall (2009) remarked that the majority of pupils doing 'O' level, operate at concrete stage. This implies that the child can think logically in the presence of concrete objects like teaching aids but find difficulties in dealing with highly abstract concepts. With the help of

leading questions and teaching aids, pupils will be directly involved in the learning process.

A discussion on taxonomy of educational objectives upon which the "New History" phenomenon is based is very significant. Using Bloom's taxonomy as the basis, Coltham and Fines (1971), formulated a simplified hierarchy on the learning objectives. The objectives were grouped under a framework containing four main components notably, 'Attitude towards the study of History, nature of discipline, skills and abilities, and educational outcomes of study'. The taxonomy helps history teachers in preparing child centred lessons. Furthermore, the taxonomy helps history teachers when formulating questions for discussion and assignments. For instance, the history teacher may begin by setting lower order questions and move on to higher order questions. Pupils may research on their own from the simple to the complex questions. The ability by pupils to learn through discovery is an important achievement which motivates them to like History. In interviews with teachers, it was agreed that learning through discovery is the corner-stone of the "New History" philosophy. However, pupil centred lessons are difficult to make because of limited teaching and learning materials.

What has to be done to rescue the situation? Affirmative action to prop up the subject should urgently start with in-servicing history teachers to acquaint them with pedagogical demands of the "New History". Jones (1970:98) says that:

History teachers in an education system involving new structures and new styles to meet the demands of new rapidly changing society, cannot escape the obligation to face and accept new approaches to the syllabus and to teaching methods.

New Different Methods/Models of Teaching History

New methods should shun the banking concept which views the learner as tabularasa and instead approach History as a mode of enquiry where pupils and teachers partake of historical evidence in reconstructing the past. Teachers should make history visible not only in the teaching-learning process, but within the generality of the school. Running a school newspaper or magazine could be an attractive adventure to most pupils even those not doing the subject.

A good history teacher could also use various lively models in History to generate interest in the pupils and sell his subject. Picture study is one interesting model in history teaching. Pupils like pictures so they are naturally drawn to the teacher's side. Using pictures, the teacher can bring the past to the present in the minds of the pupils. They help pupils build up a record of the past more vividly. For example, work cards, film strips, slides and cuttings. Such physical evidence is in tandem with Piaget's concrete operational demands. Commenting on the importance of pictures in stimulating thought, Garvey and Krug (1977:26) say that;

*The historian is different from a journalist.
A journalist does not have to depend much
on imagination – he is part of the world he
describes and studies but the historian
describes a time different from his own.
Pictures help to bring the past to the
present.*

Questions should guide the picture study to enable focus and to lead pupils to discover and develop empathy in judging the past.

Another model of history teaching is document study, for example, a study of excerpts of the Rudd Concession of 1888; the Balfour Declaration of 1917 or the Lancaster House document. These are primary evidence and pupils are stimulated to learn with first hand evidence. The documents could be studied with the help of structured questions to promote the hierarchical development of concepts.

Another method of history teaching is simulation and drama. This is an integral part of history thinking because there is drama in imagination (Garvey and Krug, 1977: Stockley, 2008: Kendall, 2009: Hollowell:2010). Games make History lively for the pupils and challenge their imagination in role modeling. For example, the history of European dictators of the 1930s could be studied through simulation of the meetings between Hitler and Chamberlain. Pupils need to know the characters of the two statesmen at that time in order to empathise them. Thus, the pupils must belong to Europe of the 1930s in order to reconstruct the epoch, and at the same time belong to their own generation. This develops empathy and objective analysis of the past. If done properly, this method could go a long way in generating interest in the pupils. However, not all pupils may have the potential to appreciate the historical skills. Teachers should be honest and choose those capable of the academic competency needed. Pupils should be given a chance to produce their own scripts for simulation. This enhances learning because they understand more by doing.

The questioning model is another interesting method of history teaching. If questions are well planned, they challenge the imagination of the learners. Comprehension questions for example, seek factual information on the gist of the story. Interpretation questions ask for meaning that can be deduced from the source. This is a higher order skill than comprehension. Other questions are exploratory, seeking to probe and draw conclusions. Invention questions want the learner to describe what he or she could have done in the same historical circumstances. However, evaluative questions are concerned with judging the reliability of the historical source. All these forms of questions need to be employed in combination to develop the learners from lower to higher order thinking. Teachers will find history lessons eventful if the teacher uses them with caution. The questioning model could be used for note-making to enable the pupils to make history summaries and to groom them into young historians by gathering written evidence.

Interest could also be generated through map study. This method is more appealing because it allows for subject integration. Geography

students get stimulated as they handle familiar evidence. In addition, History becomes lively with walls dressed in charts and maps. An important consideration is to allow pupils to draw their own maps. They should learn to obtain information from the map as well as to put information on the map. These are some of the basic methodological strategies that history teachers may employ to vary the history diet and generate pupils' interest. However, there are as many history methods as there are history teachers. History teachers are encouraged to keep inventing new strategies.

CONCLUSION

The "New History" phenomenon was an attempt to revive pupils' interests in History. Prior to the launch of the "New History" approach, it was widely believed that History was in danger as it faced competition from Social Sciences. It was feared that History could be removed from the curriculum. With the implementation of the "New History" approach, teachers will be discouraged from using traditional teaching methods. Instead, they were urged to use instructional media and to vary teaching strategies to stimulate pupils' interests in the subject.

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